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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3038
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5356
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3084
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2949
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3600
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1033
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3652
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: AVAILABILITY OF QURAN IN TURKMENISTAN

¶1. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A survey of bookstores in central Ashgabat to check the availability of the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, revealed that the book was practically unavailable in state stores except for rare cases of second-hand copies. The only other places where the Quran could be bought were at an Iranian bookshop and from a private bookseller. During the visit to the Iranian store, the clerk explained that to import and sell the Quran in Turkmenistan, the store needed approval by the Presidential Council on Religious Affairs. In a predominantly Muslim society, the unavailability of the Quran for purchase seems to be an anomaly. The authorities' strict control over the availability of religious literature, including Islamic literature, highlights the state's insecurity about the impact that the unrestricted practice of religion could have on the current status quo in Turkmen society. END SUMMARY.

UNAVAILABILITY OF QURAN IN STATE BOOKSTORES

¶3. (SBU) On June 19, Embassy Political Assistant visited bookstores in central Ashgabat to check the availability of the Quran for purchase by the public. Having visited four bookstores, including an Iranian bookshop, the Quran was found in only two stores, a relatively large, well-stocked state bookstore and the Iranian shop. The state store offered second-hand copies of the Quran in Arabic, Russian and Turkish languages in big and small sizes, with prices ranging from 400,000 to 600,000 non-denominated Turkmen manats, around USD 28-43. According to the saleslady, the books were brought in by a private owner. The Qurans were not openly displayed on the counter, but had to be asked for. Then the saleslady brought them from a hard-to-see corner shelf and removed them from a cloth covering. When asked whether those copies of the Quran were the only ones available, the saleslady nodded and said that they usually do not have copies of the Quran for sale.

¶4. (SBU) The Iranian shop sells not only the Quran, but other items of a religious character such as prayer rugs, souvenirs with Arabic inscriptions, and shawls. It was the only store in the city that had the Quran in English. This translation, subtitled "The First American English Translation" by T.B. Irving, was printed in Tehran and cost 250,000 non-denominated Turkmen manats (about USD 18). The book also included Arabic text on each page. The salesman said the shop previously had copies in Arabic, but they had already sold out. When asked whether the store expected a new shipment, the man said he did not expect any in the near future because "in order to be sold in the store, importation of the Quran requires approval by the [Presidential] Council on Religious Affairs." However, he did not know precisely who approves or disapproves religious literature coming into the country's bookstores, nor did he know based on which criteria.

PRIVATE BOOKSELLER

¶5. (SBU) Visiting another state bookstore that did not have the Quran, Political Assistant asked the salesperson where in the city one could buy a copy. The saleslady provided the telephone number of an individual who might have copies for sale. The person contacted was a Russian man living in Turkmenistan who is a private book dealer and often travels to Russia to attend book fairs. He said he had several versions of the Quran: one version in

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Russian translation, one version with both Russian and Arabic text, and three versions in Arabic in different sizes, including a pocket size. His book prices ranged from 150,000 to 1,400,000 non-denominated Turkmen manats which is around USD 11-100. When asked whether there was a Turkmen translation of the Quran, the book dealer said he did not have any in Turkmen language. According to him, "the Quran in Turkmen translation was published only once in the 1990s," however, he noted that people say "the translation does not correspond well to the Arabic text."

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Officials of the Presidential Council on Religious Affairs frequently mention during official meetings that the majority of Turkmenistan's population is Muslim. In a country where the majority of people are Muslims, it seems to be an anomaly that it is so difficult to buy the Quran in Arabic, not to mention its Turkmen translation. The scarcity of the Quran suggests that the government is concerned about the effect that the holy book's widespread availability could have if people were able to read the Quran themselves and compare its teachings with current social life and state policy. In addition, its unavailability could be related to the authorities' policy of equally restricting access to religious literature for all religious groups.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: In general, the majority of Turkmen have a Quran in Arabic in their homes. Even if they cannot read Arabic, the fact of having the holy book is believed to protect a family from evil and misfortune. For an explanation of the Quran, most people rely on imams, who are appointed by the Council on Religious Affairs at national, provincial, city and district levels. The scarcity of the Quran in a familiar language leaves people little choice but to turn to the state-appointed imams for the "correct" interpretation of the book, a further sign of the government's policy of strict control over religious life in the country. END COMMENT.

MILES